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Review of Exhibition

Jheronimus Bosch e Venezia (Venezia, Palazzo Ducale, Appartamento del Doge, 18 February- 4 June 2017). Catalogue *Jheronimus Bosch e Venezia* ed. Bernard Aikema. Venice, Marsilio Editori, 2017. 237 pp. €35. ISBN 978-8831727235

The recent exhibition entitled *Jheronimus Bosch e Venezia* held in Venice's sumptuous Ducal Palace was built around the highly tendentious idea that the great Flemish master had a significant and lasting impact on the progress of visual art in Renaissance Venice. The wider visual evidence suggests otherwise, however, given that very few of the major painters working in the city during the sixteenth century took much notice of Bosch's moralistic allegories of human depravity and sin. One looks largely in vain for any sign that the main protagonists of this tradition—Gentile and Giovanni Bellini, Sebastiano del Piombo, Giorgione, Palma Vecchio, Lorenzo Lotto, Pordenone, Bonifazio dei Pitati, Paris Bordone, Andrea Schiavone, Jacopo Tintoretto and Paolo Veronese— were especially interested in Bosch, even though they worked in a period when his influence quickly spread across much of northern Europe. Bosch's works were highly prized by the all-powerful Habsburg family in Spain, royal art patrons who also ennobled Titian and considered him to be their quasi-official court painter. But Bosch's work had as little influence on Venice's leading painter as it did on other artists in the city.

There are some significant scholarly contributions made in the finely produced accompanying catalogue, which carefully maps out the wider 'argument' or polemic of the exhibition. Contributions by Rosella Lauber and Isabella di Lenardo throw new light on the especially varied artistic taste and collection of Domenico Grimani, and on developing cultural exchanges between Flanders and Venice in the opening decades of the sixteenth century. Jos Koldeweij adds a useful essay on the state of current Bosch

research following the important international loan exhibitions held in Madrid and s'Hertogenbosch in 2016; while Giulio Bono and Maria Chiara Maida report on the excellent conservation and restoration work carried out on the three 'Venice Boschs' especially for the current show.[1] It is evident from his opening essay in this catalogue that the exhibition organizer, Bernard Aikema, was well aware of just how contentious his mounting of such an exhibition would be.[2] But interesting as the show certainly was, its wider message largely failed to convince. The visual evidence presented in the form of paintings, sculptures, prints, printed books and illuminated manuscripts, never succeeded in establishing that Bosch's minutely-handled and obsessively-detailed approach to painting, with its continual intimation of the immanent apocalyptic destruction of the world, was widely influential on Venetian art.

The more usual understanding—that Bosch's didactic art was fundamentally antithetical to the naturalistic, painterly and increasingly classicizing (*all'antica*) values of the Venetian tradition- easily survives the attempted revision. Clearly, from the very start of the century, artistic culture became more 'joined-up' across much of Europe in response to factors such as the increasing mobility of artists and works; the development of international collecting and aesthetic taste; and the emergence of the fluid and translatable popularizing culture of print. 'Northern' and 'southern' visual traditions entered into an ever more knowing and symbiotic relationship with one another. So much had, in fact, already been admirably demonstrated in the case of Venice by the exhibition

[1] See Rosella Lauber, 'Per il cardinal Domenico Grimani. Tra eccellenza e "materia della fantasia", pp. 35-54; Isabella di Lenardo, 'Gli scambi artistici tra le Fiandre e Venezia: Daniel van Bomberghen e Domenico Grimani', pp. 53-64; Jos Koldeweij, 'Jheronimus Bosch e lo stato attuale della ricerca', pp. 65-82; and Giulio Bono, Maria Chiara Maida, 'La campagna di conservazione e restauro sulle opera veneziane di Bosch', pp. 83-101, all in *Jheronimus Bosch e Venezia*.

[2] Bernard Aikema, 'Jheronimus Bosch e Venezia. Tra "sogno" e "meraviglie"' in *Jheronimus Bosch e Venezia*, pp. 15-33.

entitled *Il Rinascimento a Venezia e la pittura del Nord ai tempi di Bellini, Dürer, Tiziano*, held in the Palazzo Grassi in 1999-2000, to which Aikema himself made an important contribution.[3] This earlier show was both monumental and field-changing, persuasively demonstrating that the Renaissance city was a truly international artistic melting-pot with Europe-wide dimensions. But it is quite another thing to attempt to prove that Hieronymus Bosch had a significant and lasting impact on the practice of art in Venice, especially when the 'thesis' is based on such slim documentary and visual evidence.

The exhibition had three main 'protagonists'. They were, firstly, Bosch's well-known paintings held in the Gallerie dell'Accademia: two medium-sized triptychs showing the *Martyrdom of St Ontcommernis* (illus. 1) and *Three Hermit Saints* (illus. 2) and a set of four panels showing *Paradise and Hell*; secondly, the famous Venetian patrician, cardinal and art collector, Domenico Grimani (1461-1523); and finally, the Flemish merchant and entrepreneur, Daniel van Bomberghen (dates unknown). According to the overarching narrative of the show, the Accademia paintings had been chosen for Grimani by van Bomberghen from Bosch's workshop shortly after the Flemish master's death in 1516. In the catalogue, it is suggested that these works are identical with those subsequently seen and described in the cardinal's collection in Venice by the patrician Marcantonio Michiel (1484-1552) in 1521. But the paintings that Michiel described had different subjects and were painted on canvas rather than panel. And the previously little-known van Bombergen is not documented as having chosen any paintings for Grimani in the Bosch studio at s-Hertogenbosch. These problems are acknowledged in the catalogue, but not allowed to disturb the development of the wider thesis of the exhibition.[4] Elements of

[3] See the catalogue *Il Rinascimento a Venezia e la pittura del Nord ai tempi di Bellini, Dürer, Tiziano*, Bernard Aikema and Beverly Louise Brown (eds) (Milan: Bompiani, 1999).

[4] For the issues mentioned here see, in particular, Aikema's essay in *Jheronimus Bosch e Venezia* at note 2 above.

special pleading inevitably creep into the underlying argument of the show. Michiel's supposed carelessness regarding pictorial media is adduced to explain away his testimony regarding the subjects of the cardinal's paintings; while van Bombergen's reported support of the contemporary Flemish painter Jan van Scorel in Venice is taken as proof that he also promoted Bosch in that context. Grimani's purchase of a famous Flemish Breviary in 1519, featuring a very un-Boschian series of illuminations, is taken as further evidence that he owned the Accademia paintings.[5]

The visual material displayed in the Ducal Palace exhibition was chosen and organized to 'prove' a quite precise historical argument, and it was hard to understand its organization without this always in mind. An impressive opening display of the autograph Accademia paintings, superbly restored for the occasion by the Bosch Research and Conservation Project (BRCP) and the Getty Foundation, Los Angeles, was followed by a room devoted to Cardinal Grimani's putative input, including Michiel's descriptions; pages from the Breviary; and some confusingly non-Boschian classical marbles from Grimani's art collection, presumably included to indicate his broad artistic taste. Following this, the obscure figure of van Bomberghen was introduced with the help of an open page from Karel van Mander's *Het Schilder-Boeck* of 1604 (in which he is only very briefly mentioned) and some Hebrew books that he had a hand in publishing in Venice. The following section devoted to 'Dreams and Monsters' was visually fuller, and succeeded in demonstrating a burgeoning interest in the psychologized inner world of subjective experience within elite artistic culture in early sixteenth-century Venice. But the evidence this material provided for Bosch's precise influence was also less than convincing. Giulio Campagnola's engraving of an *Astrologer* includes a dragon, but there are many earlier

[5] For the relevant sections introducing these arguments see *Jheronimus Bosch e Venezia*, pp.107-20, pp. 121-35, and pp.137-43.

examples of such beasts in Venetian art, and the print owes more to Giorgione's poetic *Three Philosophers* than to Bosch (illus. 3). In the majority of cases, such as Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia polifili* (Venice, 1499), Marcantonio Raimondi's *Dream* (ca. 1506-8), or German prints such as Martin Schongauer's *Temptation of St Anthony* (ca. 1470-71) or Albrecht Dürer's *Witch* (ca. 1500), the interest in disturbing fantasies and tormenting monsters appears to have developed essentially independently of Bosch's example. The display seemed to suggest that this interest in the darker side of reality prepared the way for the Grimani purchase. But equally, this material can be seen as diluting the more specific point regarding the influence of the Flemish painter in Venice, suggesting as it does the more general diffusion of a fascination with the bizarre and the threatening around 1500.

A potentially solid piece of evidence for the early presence of one of Bosch's Accademia triptychs in Venice is provided by a Flemish painting of a *Landscape with St Jerome* painted by Joachim Patinir and his workshop, possibly around 1516-17, in which the figure of the saint owes something to that of the protagonist in the central panel of Bosch's *Three Hermit Saints* (illus. 4 and compare illus. 2). The fact that Patinir's work was also in a Venetian art collection—that of the German merchant Lucas Rem (1481-1541)—at an early date might indicate that Bosch's work was also already in the city, and that Patinir's patron had seen it and wanted to acquire something similar. But it is likely that Rem bought Patinir's painting in Antwerp rather than Venice, and this solitary indication of the direct visual influence of the Accademia painting on another work made for a Venice-based collector does not suffice to establish Bosch's wider influence on art in the city.

The exhibition continued with examples of other paintings from the Bosch workshop, some of which were probably held in Venetian collections during the sixteenth century.

But there was little attempt here to demonstrate the wider influence of such works on the progress of Venetian artistic culture. The section on prints after Bosch did little to counteract the sense that this key point, raised by the underlying polemic of the exhibition itself, was now being studiously avoided. The final rooms, devoted primarily to the work of Joseph Heinz the Younger (ca. 1600-78), do prove the existence of a painter working in Venice who was profoundly influence by Bosch's nightmarish visions (illus. 5). But given the failure to demonstrate this kind of sustained or significant influence elsewhere in the exhibition, Heinz inevitably appears as the exception who proves the rule. Indeed, his example indicates that the radical alterity of Bosch's visionary mode, predicated on the conviction that the physical world was an evil 'other' to goodness and truth, could only surface following the demise of Venice's sensuous and worldly Renaissance artistic tradition. Bosch finally found a devotee in the art of a minor German painter who was an outsider and latecomer to Venice, and who worked during the period of its cultural decline and dissolution.

Perhaps one of the wider lessons to be learned from *Jheronimus Bosch e Venezia* is that the mounting of too determined a scholarly polemic in an exhibition risks forcing the visual evidence into pre-determined frames or patterns that undermine its capacity to illuminate or enthral. Had this show reframed its didactics in a different manner, to allow for a potentially negative outcome of its own thesis, it would have been both more suggestive and compelling. Legitimate, complex, and perhaps ultimately more interesting, questions remain to be answered about why the Venetian tradition was so resistant to Bosch's mode in an era of ever-increasing artistic interplay between north and south.

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